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Searching for Hit

There was no proof, but there was sufficient reason

? With its finely wrought balustrade, the Doric columns supporting its portico, the Villa Pietri looked like a Roman nobleman's villa that had somehow been misplaced on the edge of the African continent. It was the headquarters from which Gaddafi directed the global activities of his terrorist network. The Libyan leader himself had assigned those who went out from the villa to do his bidding their leitmotif: "Everything that puts an infected thorn in the foot of our enemies is good."

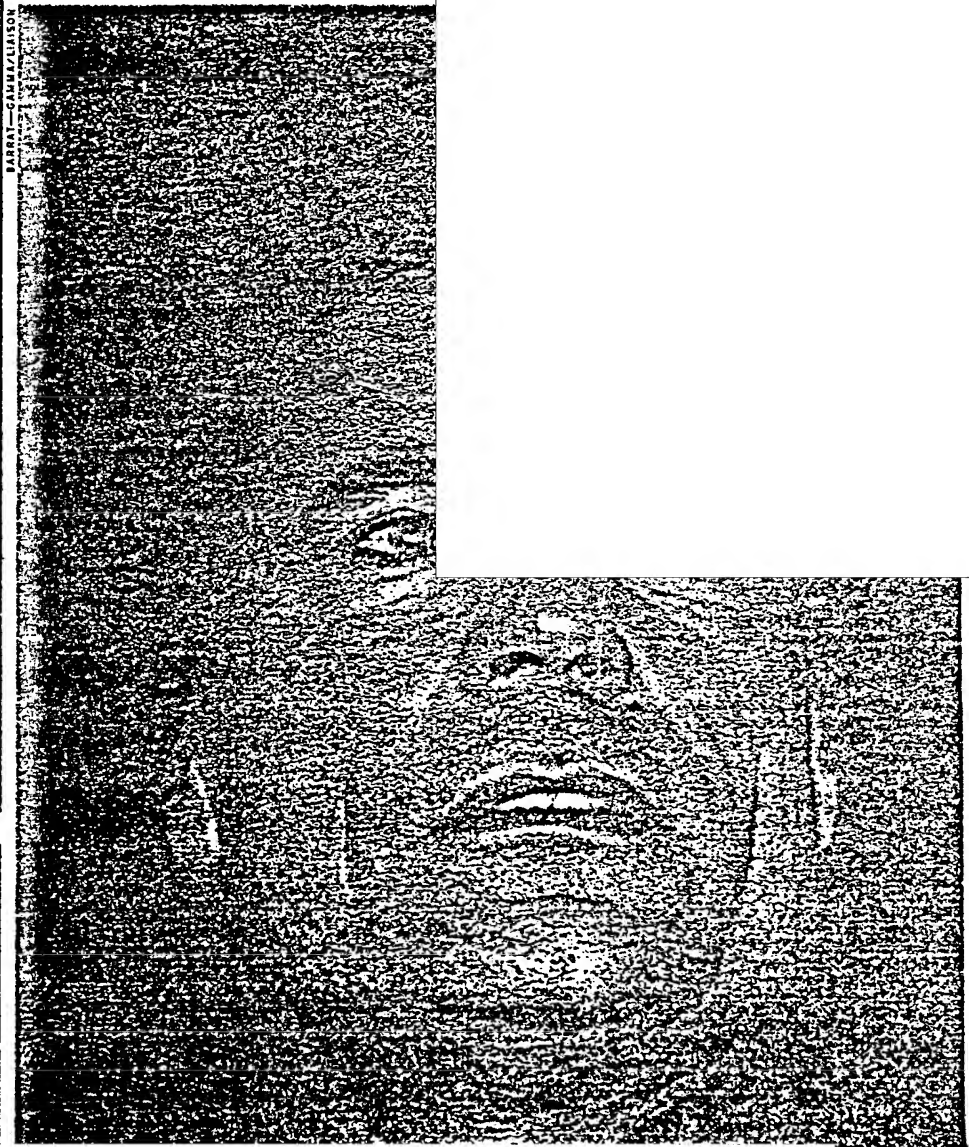
—The Fifth Horseman, by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre

It sounded like the plot of an international thriller, as frightening as the fictional tale told in the Collins-Lapierre bestseller in which Libyan Strongman Muammar Gaddafi threatens the U.S. with nuclear blackmail. According to reports received by the U.S. Government, hit teams had been dispatched by Libya to assassinate President Ronald Reagan and other top American leaders. As increasing fragments of evidence about the plot became public last week—some chilling, some bizarre, some literally beyond belief—Washington found itself embroiled in an international confrontation without precedent. If Administration reactions were confusing and contradictory, so were the facts from which decisions had to be made. If intelligence agencies and the Secret Service seemed to be reacting with undue alarm, they could offer a justification that was hard to refute: the true calamity would be to take the threat too lightly—and be wrong.

Despite skepticism in many quarters about the very existence of a hit-team plot, the White House was taking no chances. Security around the President,

which had been notably increased since the assassination attempt by John Hinckley last March, was strengthened still more. Air Force One, for example, was equipped with sophisticated electronic gear that would allow its pilot to evade missile attack, and Reagan sometimes rode in unmarked cars instead of his official limousine. At other times, presidential motorcades featured two similar limousines, both with flags flying.

The rising tensions between the U.S. and Libya were dramatically demonstra-



**"He is
silly.
He is
ignorant"**